What Should We Tell Our Children About Vietnam? Bill McCloud. 1989. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000, xviii+ 155 pp., $12.95, paper.

Reviewed by Ross Gresham, United States Air Force Academy

What Should We Tell Our Children About Vietnam? is a collection of 128 answers to that question by various figures involved with the war. Bill McCloud, a teacher of eighth grade social studies in Pryor, Oklahoma, and a Vietnam veteran himself, originally began to assemble these responses in order to teach his class about the war. His hand-written inquiries elicited replies from a surprisingly illustrious list of people: William Bennett, Robert McNamara, Henry Kissinger, Jimmy Carter, John McCain, William Westmoreland, Kurt Vonnegut, Allan Ginsberg, George Bush . . . name after famous name. Alongside these are responses from veterans, war protestors, refugees, parents of soldiers who died, and concerned citizens.

The answers vary in length from a short paragraph to several pages. Many of them read like an eighth grade history textbook, laying out historical generalizations. William Colby: "We insisted for many years in fighting a soldier's war, while our enemy was fighting a people's war." This sounds like something junior high students might have to memorize and parrot back on a test. A limitation to these responses is that they *tell* junior high school students what is true, rather than trying to *prove* or *demonstrate* it. They assume the authority of someone who can tell something to children and have it believed. I'm not sure that eighth graders know who Ken Kesey is and why they should listen to what he has to say (though McCloud does provide brief, relevant bios before each entry). Most of the letters suggest what McCloud should teach his class, assuming that he will then do the legwork to assemble the actual history.

But what's exciting about this book is that while the individual entries may present a simple line of history, this line is then contradicted twenty pages later. Peter Braestrup, a correspondent of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, writes "The South Vietnamese ally was caught up in a civil war..." Phillip Davidson Jr., "author of *Vietnam At War: The History, 1946-1975*" wants the eighth graders to know "First, the Vietnam War was *not* a civil war, nor a South Vietnamese insurgency." Jack Foisie, *"Los Angeles Times* Bureau Chief, Saigon, 1964-66" writes: "To those who contend that America could have won the conflict by greater

commitment had it not been for a home-front protesters and a disloyal press in Vietnam, nonsense." G. Gordon Liddy won't have any of that: "The American press helped the Communists do in the Vietnam War what the Nazi 'Fifth Column' could not do in World War II—destroy the morale and fighting spirit of the American home front." Veteran and author Larry Heinemann: "...there is nowadays circulating the oddly revised notion that the United States could have won the war. Where did this notion come from?" One answer would be Admiral Stockdale: "First, we lost it. Second, we could have won it easily if from the start we had fought the real enemy."

There is no moderator to pair these contradictory views, to mediate between them, or even to keep the writers on topic. The letters don't enter into conversation with each other. Country Joe McDonald follows John McCain alphabetically. Imagine an eighth grader curious about the nobility of the United States' motives for entering the war. He or she skips through the book and must negotiate between Allen Ginsberg's claim that "Vietnam was a schizokarmic mistake"; Timothy Leary (identified in his bio as a "Producer of psychedelic celebrations"): "It was a disastrous, insane, imperial invasion of a weirdo Third World country"; and Peter Kann, of the *Wall Street Journal*, "...America's motives in Vietnam were entirely honorable. To help defend a society under attack." Of course, McCloud intends the book to be used in conjunction with a class, where the instructor could choose entries, introduce them, and provide context. But it is exciting to imagine a youngster trying to wrestle with these disparate views on his or her own.

McCloud must be a great teacher. Even to thirteen-year olds, history should be taught as it is here, with many voices. Instead of memorizing an answer for a test, the student should decide upon an answer after entertaining different points of view. So while individual entries may have their limitations, the collection itself serves as a primary source for a point that David Dellinger ("antiwar activist") articulates: "...it is important to remember that honorable people sincerely differ in their opinions and judgements on such matters."